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GETTING THE STORY IN VIETNAM

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In most underdeveloped countries the relationship between the American embassy and the American reporter is fairly simple and generally straightforward. A reporter arriving in, say, a country in Africa will go to see officials of the American mission almost immediately. From them he can count on hearing the local American position, but he can also count on getting a relatively detached, if limited, view of the local government, its relations with the U.S., with the Eastern bloc, and with its neighbors. For example, when I was in the Congo for the New York *Times* in 1961 and 1962, the line went something like this: Prime Minister Adoula is better than most people think and considering the kind of country this is, really better than you might expect. As for Tshombe, don't be fooled by his anti-Communist stand. He is an anti-Communist, but he is also following a policy which he hopes will turn the rest of the Congo over to the Communists, so that his Katanga secession will look even better to the West.

This was a sensible viewpoint; it was supported, among other things, by the fact that Tshombe's deputies were always voting with the radical left in the assembly in an attempt to topple the moderate government. But it was far from the whole story. The rest of the story was that the Americans wanted to minimize Tshombe's considerable charm and ability and to make him seem just another tribal leader in Katanga, when he actually had far broader support. Thus, when I wrote a long article on him for the Sunday *Times* magazine, the State Department sent a cable to the USIS man in Leopoldville complaining that I had been too sympathetic, and suggesting that I be talked into doing an equally sympathetic piece on Adoula.

But if the State Department often makes the mistake of thinking that New York *Times* reporters are *its* reporters, the relation between American ambassadors and American reporters in most underdeveloped countries is generally one of mutual respect; if anything, reporters—and New York *Times* reporters in particular—may be treated too well. The reporter constantly has to remind himself that an ambassador in a small country where there is no immediate crisis may regard him as the best way to break through State Department channels and get his problems to the White House for breakfast.

In Vietnam, however, relationships such as these simply did not exist. Some were later to claim that the difficulties which arose between the press and the American mission were the result of poor handling or inept news management. But in fact the conflict went much deeper. The job of the reporters in Vietnam was to report the news, whether or not the news was good for America. To the ambassadors and generals, on the other hand, it was crucial that the news be good, and they regarded any other interpretation as defeatist and irresponsible. For beginning in late 1961, when President Kennedy sent General Maxwell D. Taylor to Vietnam on a special mission to see what could be done to keep the country from falling to the Communists, the American commitment there underwent a radical change. From the position of a relatively cool backstage adviser—a position not too different from the one it holds in many other underdeveloped countries—the U.S. became actively involved. Over 16,000 American troops were sent in where there had only been about 600 advisers before, and American aid was boosted to one-and-a-half million dollars a day. Thus the Kennedy administration committed itself fully to Vietnam, placing the nation's prestige in Southeast Asia squarely into the hands of the Ngo family, and putting its own political future in jeopardy.

In effect, the Taylor mission argued that the war could be won, and could be won under the existing government—provided the Vietnamese military were retrained in new methods of counter-guerrilla warfare. Taylor's report recommended that helicopters and amphibious personnel carriers be given to the Vietnamese army to increase its mobility. The report also outlined programs designed to break through Diem's overly centralized and personalized government so that American aid might filter down to the peasants. Finally, Taylor suggested a series of political reforms: broadening the base of the government by taking in non-Ngo anti-Communist elements;

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making the national assembly more than a rubber stamp; easing some of the tight restrictions on the local press. Above all, Taylor said, the government had to interest itself in the welfare of the peasant, and to this end, Diem, who was not himself corrupt or unjust, must be persuaded to stop tolerating the corruption and injustice of local officials.

The U.S. administration and some of its representatives in the field believed that the Diem government's domestic policies could be changed by all-out American support and that the government could thereby also be led into instituting reforms it had been unwilling to make on its own. Ambassador Frederick Nolting, Jr. emphasized, however, that because of Diem's peculiar psychological makeup, only support which was full and enthusiastic could influence him. It was in line with this position that Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, when visiting Vietnam in the summer of 1961 as Kennedy's personal representative, praised Diem as an Asian Winston Churchill. When, on the plane out of Saigon, a reporter tried to talk to the Vice-President about Diem's faults, Johnson snapped, "Don't tell me about Diem. He's all we've got out there."

It is not surprising, then, that by 1962 the Americans were giving in to the Ngo family on virtually everything. Having failed to get reforms, American officials said that these reforms were being instituted; having failed to improve the demoralized state of the Vietnamese army, the Americans spoke of a new enthusiasm in the army; having failed to change the tactics of the military, they talked about bold new tactics which were allegedly driving the Communists back. For the essence of American policy was: *There is no place else to go.* Backing out of South Vietnam entirely would virtually turn Southeast Asia over to the Communists and could have disastrous repercussions in the next Presidential election. To extend the U.S. commitment would involve the country in another Korean war, and it was by no means certain that the American people were prepared to support such a war. Finding a new leader might be possible, but Diem and Nhu had allowed no national hero to emerge. Consequently, there seemed no alternative to the Taylor-Kennedy policy of helping the country to help itself—sending in advisers, helicopters, pilots, fighter bombers, and pilot-trainers—while stopping short of committing American combat troops to a war against Asians on Asian soil without atomic weapons.

Because a sensitive administration back home wanted to hear that this policy was succeeding, and because of the belief that if the Americans expressed enough enthusiasm Diem would come to trust them and be more receptive to their suggestions for reform, optimism about the situation in Vietnam became an essential element of American policy itself. Not only were members of the mission regularly optimistic in their reports and in their comments to the press, but visiting VIPs were deliberately used to make things look even better. Thus, a general or some other high official from Washington would arrive in Vietnam, spend one day in Saigon being briefed and meeting the Ngo family, and another day or two in the field touring selected strategic hamlets and units. Then at the airport on his way home he would hold a press conference in which he would declare that the war was being won, that the people were rallying to the government, and that he had been impressed by the determination of that great leader, President Diem.

But with the increase in American equipment and American participation, more American reporters also arrived, and they saw little reason to be optimistic. They were told of a new popular enthusiasm for the government; they heard the American officials talk of reforms; they would pick up their American papers and read stories from Washington about new experts on guerrilla war, about special Washington staffs on counter-insurgency, about books on the subject being rushed into print to inform the American public. Then they would go into the field and see the same tired old government tactics, the same hack political commanders in charge, the same waste of human resources.

I MYSELF arrived in Saigon in September of 1962—a time of singularly bad feeling. François Sully, the *Newsweek* correspondent and for seventeen years a resident of Indo-China, had just been ordered out by the government—or rather by Madame Nhu. Though at first the American authorities had referred to the expulsion as a misunderstanding which would soon be cleared up, it was obvious that there was no misunderstanding at all. As far as anyone could tell, Sully was being expelled because he had offended Madame Nhu in a *Newsweek* article: a quotation from her about the guerrillas—"The enemy has more drive"—had been used under a photo of her paramilitary girl's organization, a cadre which she called "my little darlings," and which drew better pay than the government soldiers in the field. Cables from *Newsweek*'s highest executives pointing out that Sully had nothing to do with writing captions, were of no avail.

The expulsion of a colleague is a serious business for reporters, and in this case the arbitrariness and malice of the decision made it worse. Since Sully's departure was followed shortly by that of Jim Robinson of NBC, and since we all soon began to receive personal warnings of various kinds from agents of the government, we knew that the threat of expulsion hung over all of us. This meant that each man had to censor himself to a certain extent and to decide whether a particular story was important enough to be worth the risk of expulsion. I, for example, tried to avoid stories that would upset the Ngo family without shedding light on the serious issues of the country.

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On the other hand, in the early spring of 1963, when the military situation was deteriorating in the Delta, and then in June when it became clear that the government lacked the capacity to handle the Buddhist crisis, I decided that it was necessary to take the risk of expulsion and to write very frankly about the events involved.

What was perhaps even more disturbing than Sully's expulsion itself was the reaction of the highest American officials to it; obviously they were not in the least unhappy to see him go. He was, as one of the highest political officers at the time told me, "just a *pied noir*"—a low life. He had caused trouble for the American mission by writing solely about negative aspects of the country, and adopting a doomsday attitude toward the war. From the very beginning, then, I could see that the relation between the American mission and the American press in Vietnam was quite different from that which existed anywhere else in the world. Although the embassy occasionally chided the Ngo government for its attacks on the press, such high officials as Ambassador Nolting, General Paul Donald Harkins, and the CIA chief John H. Richardson were basically more sympathetic to the government viewpoint. They felt we were inaccurate and biased; they thought the war was being won, and they longed for control over us. "The American commitment," said an official mission white paper prepared in January 1963 for General Earle Wheeler, Chief of Staff of the Army, and rewritten once by Nolting because it was not strong enough, "has been badly hampered by irresponsible, astigmatic and sensationalized reporting."

THE SOURCES of this conflict between the press and the American mission can be seen very clearly in a comparison of the personalities of Ambassador Nolting and my predecessor as *Times* correspondent in Vietnam, Homer Bigart. Nolting is a gracious and considerate Virginian, a former philosophy professor who went into diplomacy in World War II and has been a career diplomat ever since. He had never been in the Far East before being assigned to Saigon, and because of the pressure from Washington, he badly wanted to take what the Vietnamese government was telling him at face value. If he was shown a piece of paper saying that local officials were going to do something, he was satisfied that it would be done. Though he had held an important job in NATO, he had never been much involved with reporters before, and he had almost no understanding of the press. "You're always looking for the hole in the doughnut, Mr. Halberstam," he once said to me. An extremely hard worker, he was caught in an almost impossible situation: a wartime alliance in which he was bending over backward to alleviate his ally's suspicions, at a time when his every gesture simply convinced the very same ally to take America's continued support for granted. The net effect was of a mythical partnership, for the last thing in the world the Ngo family wanted was a partnership with anyone, particularly the U.S. Still, his position would have been more sympathetic if he had not fed the fire himself. He was reporting that the war was being won, and he was pressuring his subordinates to tell him only good news; to reassure Washington, he had to believe that American policy was more successful than it actually was.

Nolting's job was difficult, but it was made even more difficult by the almost psychotic preoccupation of Diem and his family with the Western press—the one element operating in Saigon other than the Vietcong they could not control. Diem resented any criticism of his family; and since his family was in fact his government, he became angry at a wide assortment of stories. Diem and the Nhus believed that the American press was Communist-infiltrated; paradoxically the Nhus also believed that some of the reporters were CIA agents, and part of a vast underground American conspiracy against them. Hence, for example, when the first Buddhist monk burned himself to death, Diem was convinced that the act had been staged and paid for by an American television team—despite the fact that there had not been a single television man on the scene.

Every time we wrote something Diem disliked he would accuse American officials of having deliberately leaked it to us. (Actually, the source was often one of his own supposedly loyal palace intimates.) Nolting did his best to keep us from finding out anything which reflected badly on the government, but the city was filled with dissident Americans and especially Vietnamese who talked freely; it is a national characteristic of the Vietnamese that they cannot keep a secret. But unlike Diem, who could control the Vietnamese press, Nolting could not get the American reporters "on the team."

The prototype of a non-team player is Homer Bigart. A highly experienced correspondent, winner of two Pulitzer prizes for foreign reporting, Bigart has great prestige among his colleagues. He is no scholar; if he reads books it is a well kept secret, and his facility in foreign languages can be gauged by the legend about him which has it that if a Frenchman were to offer him a cigarette, he would answer: "*Je ne* smoke *pas.*" He is not one of the new breed of reporters—Yale or Harvard and a Nieman fellowship—but wherever he goes in the world he sheds light, writing simply, incisively, and informatively.

In Saigon, Bigart was fifty-five years old, and his stomach frequently bothered him. But in what was essentially a young man's assignment—a relentless, ruthless grind under tropical conditions—basic professional pride drove him on and he outworked every young reporter in town. The embassy officials who accused Sully of being a *pied noir*, and the rest of us of being too young, were obviously

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dazzled by Bigart's reputation and intimidated by his capacity to find out things they were trying to hide. Eventually they even tried to discredit his reporting by sly allusions to his age and health. When he left Vietnam there was a great sigh of relief from American officials on the scene.

As THE situation in Vietnam continued to deteriorate militarily and politically, the antagonism of the chiefs of the American mission toward American reporters grew. In the spring of 1963, the Buddhist protest began, and for four months the reporters—and Washington—watched with a sense of hopelessness Diem's inability to deal with the swelling religious-political protest. The mission's proud boasts that Diem could handle his population and that the embassy could influence the Ngo family were stripped naked during the four-month crisis. On August 21, the entire policy seemed to collapse: after months of promising U. S. officials that he would be conciliatory toward the Buddhists, Nhu—without informing the Americans—raided Vietnam's pagodas in a veritable blood bath. The embassy not only was caught cold and ignorant when it happened, but then was unable to tell who had led the raid and inaccurately blamed it on the military. Reporters, who had predicted that something of this nature was likely to happen, described the raid and identified the raider correctly. In a sense, this meant the end of the old policy, but it ironically unleashed a new wave of criticism against the reporters.

My own first experience of this new wave came in early September, when a friend sent me a column from the New York *Journal-American* in which I was accused of being soft on Communism and of preparing the way through my dispatches in the *Times* for a Vietnamese Fidel Castro. I showed the clipping to a friend in the embassy. "Well, I think you have to expect this sort of thing," he said. "There may be more." He was right; there was more. A few days later, Joseph Alsop, after a brief visit to Vietnam, attacked a group of "young crusaders" in the Saigon press corps who, he said, were generally accurate in their reporting but were responsible for the near-psychotic state of mind among the inhabitants of GiaLong Palace. Being criticized by Alsop is no small honor in this profession; those of us whom he called the "young crusaders" knew that our stock was rising. At the same time, having covered the complex evolution of the Buddhist crisis for four long months, and having spotted the Buddhists as an emerging political force long before the American embassy, we were amazed to see ourselves charged by another visiting reporter with not having understood the political implications of the crisis. And having covered the disintegration of the Delta for more than a year-and-a-half and gone on more than thirty missions in this area, some of us were equally amazed to see ourselves charged by Mr. Alsop with not having visited what he quaintly referred to as "the front."

Alsop was not our only critic. The Kennedy administration—embarrassed by what was beginning to look like a major foreign policy failure, and angered by its ineptitude in allowing the pagoda crackdown to take place, in not having diagnosed it correctly when it did take place, and in not having any answer when it finally did analyze the situation correctly—took to attacking our reporting as inaccurate, the work of a handful of emotional and inexperienced young men. In addition, the President's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, and other White House staff members more interested in their chief's political standing at home than in the status of the war in Vietnam, would knowingly inform White House reporters that we in Vietnam never went on operations.

At the Pentagon, in the higher reaches where the realities of the war rarely penetrated, the criticism was particularly vehement. Defense Department reporters were told by Major General Victor Krulak, the Pentagon's specialist on counter-insurgency, that he simply could not understand what was happening in Vietnam. Experienced correspondents such as the free-lancer Richard Tregaskis and Marguerite Higgins (then of the *Herald Tribune*, now of *Newsday*) were finding that the war was being won, while a bunch of inexperienced young reporters kept writing defeatist stories about the political side. When Maggie Higgins was in Saigon, General Krulak told a representative of *Time* magazine, young Halberstam met her at a bar and showed her a photo of some dead bodies; he asked her if she had ever seen dead bodies, and when she said yes, he burst into tears. Krulak took great delight in passing this story around—whether it was his or Miss Higgins's invention I will never know. In any case, the long knives were really out. "It's a damn good thing you never belonged to any left-wing groups or anything like that," a friend of mine high up in the State Department told me after I left Saigon, "because they were really looking for stuff like that."

On October 22, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, the new publisher of the *Times*, went by the White House to pay a courtesy call on the President of the United States. It was a time when, except for Vietnam, the administration was riding high and feeling very cocky: Kennedy was sure his 1964 opponent would be Goldwater and was confidently expecting a big victory. Almost the first question the President asked Mr. Sulzberger was what he thought of his young man in Saigon. Mr. Sulzberger answered that he thought I was doing fine. The President suggested that perhaps I was too close to the story, too involved (this is the most insidiously damaging thing that can be said about a reporter). No, Mr. Sulzberger answered, he did not think I was too involved. The President asked if perhaps Mr. Sulzberger had been thinking of transferring me to another assignment. No, said

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Mr. Sulzberger, the *Times* was quite satisfied with the present distribution of assignments. (At that particular point I was supposed to take a two-week breather, but the *Times* immediately cancelled my vacation.)

But the most curious attack of all on the Saigon press corps came from *Time* magazine. A dispute had long been simmering between *Time*'s editors in New York and its reporters in the field in Vietnam, a far sharper division than the usual one between field and office. The *Time* reporters in the field felt strongly that the magazine was giving too optimistic a view of the war. Periodically, Charles Mohr, *Time*'s chief correspondent in Southeast Asia (who had once been described by Henry Luce himself as "A reporter—and how!") would return to New York for conferences where he would argue for tougher coverage on Vietnam. But his editors, who had lunched with Secretary McNamara and other Pentagon officials and had seen the most secret of charts and the most secret of arrows, would explain patiently to him that he understood only a portion of "the big picture."

In April 1963, Richard M. Clurman, one of the foremost defenders of working reporters among *Time*'s executives, visited Saigon, met with some of the working reporters, talked with their sources, and interviewed Diem, Nhu, and Nolting. After that, matters improved somewhat, and during most of the Buddhist crisis Mohr was relatively pleased with what he was getting into the magazine. But then things took a turn for the worse again. In August 1963, a brilliant cover story he sent in on Madame Nhu was edited to underemphasize her destructive effect on the society, and several weeks later, a long and detailed piece he did on the Saigon press corps analyzing the root of the controversy and praising the work of the reporters was killed.

Finally, in early September, with Washington still searching for answers, Mohr was asked to do a roundup on the entire state of the war in Vietnam. He and his colleague, Mert Perry, put vast amounts of energy into the legwork, and the story he filed was the toughest written to that date by a resident correspondent. It began with this lead: "The war in Vietnam is being lost." Not everyone in Vietnam, Mohr noted, "would be willing to go so far at this point. But those men who know Vietnam best and have given the best of their energies and a portion of their souls to this program are suddenly becoming passionate on this subject." Washington, he continued, had asked all Saigon officials for detailed reports on what was happening, and it had given these officials a chance "to bare their souls. Much of what they write may be diluted by the time it reaches Washington. However, these men realize that they are in the middle of a first class major foreign policy crisis and that history will be a harsh judge. 'I am laying it on the line,' said one. 'Now is the time for the truth. There are no qualifications in what I write.' Another said: 'I am going on the record in black and white. The war will be lost in a year, but I gave myself some leeway and said three years.' Another said that his program in the countryside is 'dead.' One source said American military reporting in the country 'has been wrong and false—lies really. We are now paying the price.' "

This was strong stuff, and it left no doubt that American policy had failed. But it was not what the editors of *Time* magazine wanted to hear. Mohr's story was killed in New York, and an optimistic piece was printed instead bearing no relation to the copy he had filed, and assuring the world that "government troops are fighting better than ever." Since this was not what most sources—the New York *Times*, the AP, the UPI, *Newsweek*, CBS, NBC—were reporting at the time, an explanation was needed. Accordingly, Otto Fuerbringer, the managing editor of *Time*, summoned a writer into his office and (as Stanley Karnow, Mohr's predecessor as *Time* bureau chief in Southeast Asia put it in *Nieman Reports*) with "nothing but his own preconceptions to guide him, dictated the gist of an article for his magazine's Press Section." Karnow called the piece that finally appeared "a devastating compendium of bitter innuendoes and clever generalities, all blatantly impeaching American correspondents in Vietnam for distorting the news." The war, it hinted, was going better than one would gather from the small incestuous clique of reporters who sat around the Caravelle Bar in Saigon interviewing each other and never venturing forth to the countryside. It was a staggering piece, for it not only indicted all of us, but two of *Time*'s own men as well. The upshot was that they both resigned, Mohr eventually going to the *Times*, where he soon became the White House correspondent, and Perry to the Chicago *Daily News*.

NO ONE BECOMES a reporter to make friends, but neither is it pleasant in a situation like the war in Vietnam to find yourself completely at odds with the views of the highest officials of your country. The pessimism of the Saigon press corps was of the most reluctant kind: many of us came to love Vietnam, we saw our friends dying all around us, and we would have liked nothing better than to believe that the war was going well and that it would eventually be won. But it was impossible for us to believe those things without denying the evidence of our own senses. The enemy was growing stronger day by day, and if nothing else we would have been prevented from sending tranquilizing stories to our papers by a vision of the day when the Vietcong walked into Saigon and *Time* righteously demanded to know where those naïve reporters were now who had been telling the world that all was going well with the war in Vietnam. And so we had no alternative but to report the truth in the hope that we might finally break through the optimism that prevailed so obstinately in high places in America.

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